



# Kristeller and Ancient Philosophy

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# KRISTELLER AND ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

JAMES HANKINS

PAUL OSKAR KRISTELLER'S first scholarly interests and his first publications focused on the history of ancient philosophy, and his early studies were undertaken with a view to becoming a university professor specializing in the history of ancient philosophy. Even though his scholarly life later led him to the study of Renaissance philosophy and humanism, he maintained a professional interest in ancient philosophy throughout his life. When he first found employment in the United States, it was as a teacher of ancient philosophy, and a survey of Hellenistic philosophy was among his regular course offerings during the three decades of his teaching career at Columbia. These lectures were eventually published in Italian in 1991 and English in 1993; they were Kristeller's last substantial publication as an historian of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Kristeller's sophisticated understanding of ancient philosophy in all its phases and his familiarity with the relevant primary texts in the original languages gave him unique advantages in his major studies of Renaissance philosophy and humanism. The impact of Kristeller's studies of ancient philosophy upon his studies of the Renaissance is a point to which I shall return at the end of this essay.

Kristeller's first teacher of ancient philosophy was Ernst Hoffmann, with whom he began to study informally during his last years at the Mommsen-Gymnasium in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> Hoffman had received his doctorate in 1905 from Berlin, where he was a student of Hermann Diels, editor of the still-standard collection of Presocratic fragments, and Theodor Vahlen, the historian of ancient mathematics. A noted expert on Plato, Hoffmann was primarily

1. *Filosofi greci dell'età ellenistica* (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 1991); *Greek philosophers of the Hellenistic Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

2. On Hoffman, see the obituary notice by Anna Forbes Liddell in *The Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1952): 505-6. It is worth noting that Hoffmann's title was in fact "Ordinarius für Philosophie und Pädagogik," and that among his publications is a posthumously published work on *Pädagogischer Humanismus* (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1955), which gives an historical account of *Humanismus* and Western educational thought from the Presocratics to nineteenth-century Germany.

known for his rather dogmatic insistence that Plato's philosophy was a theistic doctrine which could be assimilated to the systems of Plotinus and Kant. In the later 1920s, under the influence of his colleague and friend Ernst Cassirer,<sup>3</sup> Hoffmann's interests began to spread outwards from classical philosophy to Renaissance Platonism, a move that would be emulated by Kristeller a few years later. In the mid-1920s Kristeller followed Hoffmann to Heidelberg when the latter received an appointment there in 1922 and Kristeller continued as Hoffmann's student and protégé until 1929. Hoffmann was still in his forties and just becoming established when Kristeller began studying with him.

At that point in his career Hoffman was a Neo-Kantian with strong links to the Marburg school, having studied himself with Paul Natorp and Ernst Cassirer. Marburgian Neo-Kantianism saw the history of philosophy not as an antiquarian study or as a branch of *Altertumswissenschaft*, but as a valid form of philosophical activity in itself. In particular, Neo-Kantian history of philosophy fought against the historicism of Hegel and his school, attempting to show that pre-modern Western thought was not vitiated by its supposedly more limited consciousness of human autonomy and freedom. Instead, Neo-Kantians held that premodern Western philosophy, like contemporary philosophy, was, as it were, fully adult, and contained ideas and arguments that remained universally valid for all time. Ancient philosophy was studied as a treasury of positions and arguments that could be utilized by modern philosophers, who could study it unembarrassed by the scruples of historicism (or, as we might now say, of linguistic contextualism). Neo-Kantian historians of philosophy were especially interested in Plato and the Platonic tradition because they saw in the Platonic theory of ideas and late Platonic logic an anticipation of Kantian apriori judgments and regulative ideas. The commonality between Plato and Kant was not merely a matter of historical interest for Neo-Kantians; Platonic authority also helped establish the universal truth of Kantianism by showing the presence of Kant's leading ideas in the thought of the greatest Western philosophers. For Neo-Kantians of the Marburg school, Platonism was a *philosophia perennis*.<sup>4</sup>

As a leading representative of this tradition, it is no surprise that Hoffmann put the young Kristeller on to the study of Plotinus. Hoffmann and Heinrich Rickert, Kristeller's other great Neo-Kantian teacher, edited a series, the

3. The two wrote a textbook together: Ernst Cassirer and Ernst Hoffmann, *Die Geschichte der antiken Philosophie* (Berlin: [Ullstein], 1925). Cusanus played a central role in all of Cassirer's historical writing about the Renaissance.

4. On Neo-Kantianism in general see Klaus Christian Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism: German Academic Philosophy between Idealism and Positivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

*Heidelberger Abhandlungen zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte*, which published studies of Kantian philosophy, polemics against phenomenology, and studies of ancient philosophy, particularly Platonic philosophy. Most of the volumes in the series were by students of Rickert and Hoffman, including a volume by Ernst Cassirer's son Heinrich, who later emigrated to the United States and became a Protestant theologian and Kantian scholar. It was in this series in 1929 that Kristeller published his first book, *Der Begriff der Seele in der Ethik des Plotin*,<sup>5</sup> a study somewhat altered from the thesis of the same title finished under Hoffmann at Heidelberg during the summer of 1928.

The project of *Der Begriff der Seele* was to show the organic interrelationship between two sides of Plotinus' thought that had previously been treated as distinct and almost unrelated aspects of his system, namely his metaphysics and what Plotinus scholars at the time considered his "religious mysticism" or "*vie spirituelle*".<sup>6</sup> Kristeller showed that the "inner experience" of the soul, its contemplative ascent to the One, not only was an avenue to awareness of higher realities, but in effect constituted them; that the activity of soul and mind is the higher reality upon which physical realities depend. Consequently, the three Hypostases of Mind, Soul and Body can be considered either statically, as objectively existing realities, or dynamically, from the point of view of "inner experience". The terms Kristeller used to describe these two tendencies, *gegenständlich*, corresponding to the metaphysical analysis of reality, and *aktuell*, corresponding to the "turning within" of the soul, were later picked up by the great Plotinus scholar Hans Rudolf Schwyzer, and have become standard terms in German Plotinus scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Readers of the German edition of *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*<sup>8</sup> will also recognize these terms, as well as the concept of "inner experience," which Kristeller later used to analyze Ficino's thought.

Kristeller's distinction between the *gegenständlich* and the *aktuell* turned out to be the most significant contribution of his book to the interpretation of Plotinus, but in the study itself, the analysis of the soul's relation to reality was meant to illustrate certain themes in Plotinian ethics. In particular, the

5. *Heidelberger Abhandlungen zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte* 19 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1929).

6. The most influential books on Plotinus of the 1920s were W.R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917-1918* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1918; repr. 1923, 1929, 1948); Émile Bréhier, *La philosophie de Plotin* (Paris: Boivin, 1928); René Arnou, *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin* (Paris: Alcan, 1921).

7. "Die Zweifache Sicht in der Philosophie Plotins," *Museum Helveticum* 1 (1944): 87-99.

8. *Die Philosophie des Marsilio Ficino* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1972).

conclusion to which the thesis builds is a demonstration of the kinship between Plotinian psychological experience and Kant's doctrine of freedom.

According to Kant [writes Kristeller], the Will is free or unfree to the extent that its choices are made rationally and ethically. This corresponds to the *hekousion* and *akousion* of Plotinus. Moreover, according to Kant the Will is capable of choosing for itself Freedom or Unfreedom through an intelligible act. This is identical in meaning to the ethical *Prohairesis* of Plotinus. It is a paradoxical situation: [the fact that] consciousness has the liberty to be free or unfree holds the same meaning for both thinkers. It is here less a case of a demonstrable influence of Plotinus on Kant than a similarity in basic philosophical concepts, which leads to similar intellectual consequences. [pp. 88-89]

For Kristeller, Kant's idea that human beings achieve autonomy through freely willing the good, conceived as a dictate of apriori reason and therefore universal and disinterested, is *identical* to the Plotinian doctrine that sees freedom as residing in the consciousness that the human soul is constitutive of the rational order in the intelligible cosmos. A subtext or consequence of this reading is that Plotinus is liberated from interpreters who saw him as subservient to static norms and therefore an obstacle to the emergence of immanentism — or, on the other hand, as simply a religious mystic using the language of Platonism to describe an experience of God.

Kristeller's book also contains at the end a few pages on the influence of Plotinus on the later tradition of Western philosophy, pages which turned out to be prophetic of Kristeller's later career. Following Hoffmann's essay, "Platonismus in Mittelalter," published a few years before in the *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*,<sup>9</sup> Kristeller claimed that "the history of Platonism from Plotinus to the Renaissance and beyond is essentially a history of *Plotinismus*" (106). It is in these pages that Kristeller first mentions the name of Marsilio Ficino as the most important figure in the fifteenth-century Renaissance of *Plotinismus*: "above all one must mention Marsilio Ficino, who translated and commented on the complete works of Plotinus and thus laid the basis for his later spiritual influence as well as for learned studies of him." Kristeller admitted that Plotinus' influence on early modern philosophy had been less prominent but held out the possibility that "even here it is likely that his influence was greater than has hitherto been expected."

The path to the study of Ficino would seem to have lain straight ahead. Hoffmann's study of medieval Platonism and Cassirer's *Individuum und Kosmos*, published shortly afterwards in 1927, also by the Bibliothek Warburg, indicated the direction in which the historical research of the Neo-Kantians

9. (1923-1924): 17-82.

was moving as it tried to establish the continuity of the Platonic tradition in the West. But Kristeller's career ended up following a different route. After publishing his thesis in the *Heidelberger Abhandlungen*, Hoffmann turned around and rejected Kristeller as an *Habilitand* on the grounds that he had a prior commitment to another Jewish student, and could not possibly support two Jewish candidates at the same time. The student to whom Hoffmann had a prior commitment was Raymond Klibansky, who had made the electrifying discovery of a previously unknown fragment of Proclus preserved in a medieval translation of Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides*.<sup>10</sup> It was Klibansky who followed Hoffmann's lead into the study of Nicolaus Cusanus and became his chief collaborator in editing the Heidelberg Academy edition of Cusanus' works (founded in 1927). But Kristeller did not give up his hope of teaching philosophy at the university level and in 1931 was finally accepted as a *Habilitand* by Martin Heidegger, who was then at Freiburg.

Kristeller had known Heidegger since 1926 when he had spent a semester in Marburg, where Heidegger then taught. Kristeller later remembered, though with some uncertainty, that he had heard Heidegger lecture on Aristotle, but Heidegger's modern biographers identify the lectures he gave that semester as a part of a course on the pre-Socratic philosophers.<sup>11</sup> Since the chief sources for the thought of the pre-Socratics are the works of Aristotle, the confusion is understandable. Kristeller developed a warm personal relationship with Heidegger, having dinner with him once a week and entertaining his family on the piano. (Kristeller had earlier formed a piano trio with two other Heidegger students, Karl Löwith and Hans Georg Gadamer.) Though some of Heidegger's biographers believe the great philosopher was secretly attached to the Nazi cause as early as 1929,<sup>12</sup> Kristeller seems to have been oblivious to Heidegger's politics until the summer of 1933, when the latter emerged as the leading representative of the Nazi party on the faculty at Freiburg.

Even in 1931, to study with Heidegger might appear to be something of a reversal of Kristeller's previous philosophical loyalties. Neo-Kantianism in the

10. Raymond Klibansky, *Ein Proklus-Fund und seine Bedeutung. Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophische-Historische Klasse, Bericht 5* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1929).

11. See Hans-Martin Saas, *Martin Heidegger: Bibliography and Glossary* (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, Bowling Green State University, 1982), 82; Some of Heidegger's work on the Presocratics may be found in his *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975). Kristeller's memories of his course with Heidegger are recorded in Margaret King, "Iter Kristellerianum: The European Journey (1905–1939)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47.4 (1994): 907–29 at 914.

12. See Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger*, trans. Allan Blunden (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

1920s was the official philosophy of the academic establishment. Challenges had been mounted to its dominant position, first by Dilthey and his epigones in the movement for *Geistesgeschichte* — a movement Kristeller rejected under the influence of Rickert. Other challenges were mounted by phenomenology, led by Edmond Husserl, and by existentialism, inspired by Kierkegaard and transplanted to Weimar Germany by Karl Jaspers. Kristeller had little use for Husserl and not much respect for Jaspers, at least as a scholar, but the case of Heidegger was different. Heidegger had a wide and enthusiastic following among philosophy students in the later 1920s, especially after his “defeat” of Cassirer in their famous debate at Davos in 1929.<sup>13</sup> The letters of Hannah Arendt and other sources give a vivid impression of the excitement caused by his challenge to neo-Kantianism and the idealistic tradition in general.<sup>14</sup> It would be tempting, and perhaps not wholly implausible, to posit a “Heideggerian” stage in Kristeller’s intellectual development, following his rejection by Hoffmann. However, aside from some existential buzzwords in the Plotinus thesis, there is not much support in the the sources for such an hypothesis. Kristeller tells us that he valued Heidegger as an interpreter of ancient philosophy, but there is no evidence that he ever deviated from his Platonizing Neo-Kantianism in later life. He respected Heidegger’s greatness as a philosopher and was proud to have been his student but did not agree with him.

The more interesting question is whether Heidegger’s hermeneutical method in some way influenced Kristeller, but here too any conclusions must be speculative. He certainly shared with Heidegger an interest in the history of philosophical terms and their transformations over time, and may have picked up from him the idea that the Augustinian/scholastic concept of *existentia* (the act of existing as opposed to *esse*, the fact of existence) had its roots in the Stoic notion of *huparxis* and not in Aristotle, as was claimed by neo-scholastics such as Gilson.<sup>15</sup> But the history of philosophical terms was an interest of Hoffmann’s as well and it is certainly hard to identify anything peculiarly Heideggerian in Kristeller’s method of textual analysis.

After completing his book on Plotinus, but before sitting for the Prussian State Board examinations in Berlin, Kristeller wrote (in Latin) a substantial paper on Cicero’s understanding of the most important philosophical term in the Platonic tradition, namely the term *eidos* or form (and *idea*, a virtual synonym). In this paper he tried to trace the evolution of the concept through

13. See Peter Eli Gordon, “Continental Divide: Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos, 1929: An Allegory of Intellectual History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 1.2 (2004): 219–48.

14. Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, *Letters, 1925-1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz, trans. Andrew Shields (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2004).

15. Kristeller, *Greek Philosophers*, 25–27 and note.

Hellenistic philosophy down to Plotinus, making use in particular of the neglected evidence of Cicero's *Orator*. The paper was published in expanded form sixty years later by the University of Heidelberg on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Kristeller's doctorate.<sup>16</sup> Had it been published in 1929, it would have been an important early contribution to the literature on "intradeical" ideas in Middle Platonism, a theme later investigated by several students of later Greek philosophy after the Second World War.<sup>17</sup>

Kristeller also incorporated the research he did for this paper and for a long review of Willy Theiler's *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus* (1930) into his other book-length contribution to ancient philosophy, *Filosofi greci dell'età ellenistica* (1991), published in English in 1993 as *Greek Philosophers of the Hellenistic Age*.<sup>18</sup> This book was based on lectures given at the Scuola Normale in Pisa in 1989, which were in turn based on the survey course on Hellenistic philosophy Kristeller taught many times at Columbia. The format of the book was meant to imitate the form Kristeller used in his better-known work, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (1964).

By the time *Greek Philosophers* was shaped into book form, Kristeller had not taught Hellenistic philosophy for twenty years and had not published in the field for nearly sixty. So it was not to be expected that the lectures would break new ground. Its value lies rather in its synoptic sense of the place of Hellenistic philosophy in the Western tradition as a whole. It is hard to think of many students of ancient philosophy who could so casually introduce the subject the influence of Hellenistic philosophical concepts on the philosophies of Ficino, Bruno, Gassendi, Leibniz and Spinoza. The book is also valuable as an illustration of a sound philological method in the reconstruction of philosophical doctrines. It contains as well many *obiter dicta*, some amusing, some bitter, on the state of the philosophical enterprise and Western civilization as a whole. The book shows Kristeller's continuing belief in the ability of ancient philosophy to solve ethical problems in the modern world, as the passages on natural law, for example, show (pp. 38, 78). Kristeller is particularly concerned to establish, on the evidence of

16. The original paper, "De formarum sive idearum apud Ciceronem notione," written as a thesis for a philosophy seminar in Berlin, is preserved in the Kristeller Papers deposited in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University; the paper was eventually published under the title *Die Ideen als Gedanken der menschlichen und göttlichen Vernunft. Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophische-historische Klasse*, no. 2 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1989).

17. See A.H. Armstrong, "The Background of the Doctrine 'That the Intelligibles Are not Outside the Intellect'," in *Les Sources de Plotin: Entretiens Hardt* 5 (Geneva, 1960), 393–425.

18. See note 1. Kristeller's review of Theiler was published in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 3.3 (1932): 438–45; see also his *Greek Philosophers*, 150–51.



Stoic doctrine, that a belief in natural law is compatible with empiricism and materialism and is not dependent on religious imperatives or on “those Kantian ideal and apriori principles that are valid for me but denied by the majority of our contemporaries.” Materialism need not imply ethical nihilism, in other words. Hence Kristeller’s efforts, directed against Leo Strauss and others, to distinguish Stoic natural law theory from the Aristotelian concept of *nomos*.

In conclusion, it is worth raising the issue of the effect Kristeller’s training and early studies in ancient philosophy had on his work as a Renaissance scholar. Apart from method, it is evident that his mastery of ancient and especially late ancient philosophy was a crucial element in his studies of humanism and Renaissance thought. Kristeller’s chief contribution as an interpreter of the Renaissance, in my view, is his determined historicizing of humanism and Renaissance philosophy, his resistance to the powerful anachronistic tendency in most prewar and much postwar historiography to assimilate the thought of the Italian Renaissance to modern humanisms and modern philosophies.<sup>19</sup> One key to Kristeller’s ability to distinguish Renaissance humanism and philosophy from the moderns was his awareness of the ancient roots of much Renaissance philosophical reflection. It was difficult, for example, to maintain that Pico was really a Sartrean existentialist, as some interpreters maintained in the 1950s, once the most “existentialist” statements in his *Oration* had been identified as near-quotations from Boethius and the Cappadocian Fathers. It is hard to say that humanist statements about the radical freedom of mankind are “intellectual breakthroughs” looking forward to Hegel when it can be demonstrated that they come directly out of Plotinus or the Stoics. The current tendency to historicize the Renaissance may, perhaps, go too far, and in my opinion has gone too far, but Kristeller’s example shows that any attempts to demonstrate the modernity of Renaissance thought must begin from a solid mastery of the texts of the ancient philosophers in their original language.



19. See my articles, “Two Twentieth-Century Interpreters of Renaissance Humanism: Eugenio Garin and Paul Oskar Kristeller,” *Comparative Criticism* 23 (2001): 3–19; and “Renaissance Philosophy Between God and the Devil,” in *The Renaissance in the Twentieth Century: Acts of an International Conference, Florence, Villa I Tatti, June 9–11, 1999*, ed. Allen J. Grieco, Michael Rocke, Fiorella Gioffredi Superbi, *Villa I Tatti Studies* 19 (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2002), 269–93. Both were reprinted in my *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003–2004), 1:573–90 and 591–15 respectively.